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ABSTRACT

Contemporary women continue to choose the role of motherhood, but questions remain about women's attitudes toward the timing of parenthood, the perceived effect of parenthood on the marital relationship, the perceived effect of parenthood on males as well as females, and the perceived contribution of children to the relationship. A sample of undergraduate female students (N=980) at four state universities completed the Timing for Parenthood Scale. Additional items were constructed to measure perceived preparation for parenthood and to obtain demographic information. Results were analyzed by state and by comparing women who desired small families to those who desired large families. Most women were in favor of postponing parenthood until later in marriage and did not feel that postponement prevented self-fulfillment. (Author/KMF)

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# CONTEMPORARY WOMEN AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD PARENTHOOD: EXTENSION AND REPLICATION

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CONTEMPORARY WOMEN AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD PARENTHOOD

It was assumed in earlier decades that children were the natural and normal outcome of marriage and as such a large family was deemed more appropriate than a small family. Since children were considered essential for family 'togetherness' and, many believed, to women's sense of fulfillment, beginning a family early in marriage was the ideal. Women who did not have children early in their marriages were pitied for their incomplete, unfulfilled lives (Bernard, 1975; Hartley, 1972). This attitude was not only widely held among the public, but within the academic community of family scholars (Eversoll, Knaub & Voss, 1979).

It is often suggested that we are living in a 'freedom of choice' era regarding the adult roles (separately and in combination) of work, adult relationships and living arrangements, and parenting. Although behavioral changes indicating some liberalization in lifestyle choices are documented (Libby & Whitehurst, 1977; Hawke & Knox, 1977; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971), one role for which behavior continues to be astoundingly homogeneous is women's participation in motherhood.

Most women have in the past and will continue to become mothers (Bernard, 1974, 1975; Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble & Zellman, 1979; Blake 1979). That females are socialized from babyhood onward to want and need to become mothers is well documented (Bernard, 1975; Walum, 1977; Hoffman, 1977; Bem & Bem, 1976). Further, recent research suggests that (a) the proportion of women expecting or preferring to be permanently childless remains small (2.5% in 1977), and (b) women continue to express a high level of consensus that parenthood is an advantaged status

(Blake, 1979). Together these bodies of literature would seem to predict a future in which most women will continue to become parents.

Although choosing the role of motherhood remains surprisingly consistent with women, questions remain regarding attitudes toward time of parenthood. For example, as recently as 1969 research indicated that attitudes existed which would constitute a pervasive societal pressure toward having children early in marriage (Maxwell & Montgomery, 1969). On the other hand, there is some suggestion that women are now waiting longer after marriage to have their first child (Current Population Reports, 1977). It has been argued that a relationship exists between the delay of parenthood and such variables as educational level (Maxwell & Montgomery, 1969; Bernard, 1975), and career orientation (Bernard, 1975), and feminist ideology (Lott, 1973). What then are the attitudes of young women today toward the timing of parenthood? The present study was designed to determine young women's attitudes toward the timing of parenthood, the perceived effect of parenthood on the marital relationship, the perceived effect of parenthood on males as well as females, the perceived contribution of children to the relationship, and the sample's perceived adequacy of their preparation to parent.

Sample

The sample consisted of undergraduate female students at four universities enrolled in various colleges within the universities. A total population of 980 students was obtained. The respondents were primarily between the ages of 18-23 (92.1%), unmarried (88.1%), without children (95%) and from intact (89.9%), middle class families

(based on the Hollingshead Two-factor Index of Social Position). Forty-five percent of the mothers of the subjects were full-time homemakers (54% employed). With reference to the size of their family of orientation, 49% were from families of three or fewer children and 51% were from families of four or more children.

Instrumentation and Statistical Treatment

The Timing for Parenthood Scale developed by Maxwell and Montgomery (1969), constructed to measure attitudes toward parenthood, was administered the beginning of fall quarter (1980), to obtain data for the present study. The items in the Likert-type scale were characterized by five degrees of response from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Responses favoring early parenthood were given the highest score. Possible scores range from 10-50. In an item analysis conducted by Maxwell and Montgomery, each of the ten scale items was found to discriminate significantly between upper and lower quartile groups at the .001 level of significance. In addition, an item was constructed for this study to measure perceived preparation for parenthood and separate items were developed to obtain necessary demographic information.

The data anlysis was comprised first of a frequency count for the sample as a whole, then an analysis of variance ($F$) was employed to establish the existence of any variation among the groups (designated by course enrollment), followed by the Student-Newman-Kuells procedure to identify any precise group variation.

TABLE 1. SCALE ITEMS BY PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING AND DISAGREEING* IN A FOUR-STATE SAMPLE

| | AGREE | | | | DISAGREE | | | | UNDECIDED | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | CAL | IO | NEB | ND | CAL | IO | NEB | ND | CAL | IO | NEB | ND |
| 1. The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage. | 10.8% | 13.6% | 7.9% | 8.7% | 79.9% | 78.1% | 86.2% | 83.9% | 9.3% | 8.3% | 5.8% | 7.4% |
| 2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage. | 79.4% | 75.1% | 78.3% | 83.4% | 12.9% | 11.7% | 11.1% | 9.4% | 7.7% | 13.2% | 10.6% | 7.1% |
| 3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of the marriage. | 4.6% | 6.3% | 6.9% | 6.3% | 84.5% | 78.5% | 77.2% | 84.0% | 10.8% | 15.1% | 15.9% | 9.7% |
| 4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in the marriage. | 8.8% | 7.8% | 5.8% | 6.1% | 78.4% | 78.1% | 74.6% | 81.4% | 12.9% | 14.2% | 19.6% | 12.5% |
| 5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home. | 9.8% | 6.8% | 33.9% | 10.9% | 73.2% | 73.2% | 47.1% | 69.0% | 17.0% | 20.0% | 19.1% | 20.1% |
| 6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child. | 12.9% | 6.8% | 9.0% | 8.9% | 79.9% | 90.2% | 84.1% | 83.4% | 7.2% | 2.9% | 6.9% | 7.8% |
| 7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so. | 4.6% | 2.4% | 3.2% | 4.1% | 93.3% | 95.1% | 94.2% | 2.1% | 2.1% | 2.4% | 2.7% | 3.8% |
| 8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eager to have a child as soon as possible. | 8.2% | 7.3% | 4.8% | 7.9% | 85.1% | 86.3% | 85.2% | 86.0% | 6.7% | 6.3% | 10.1% | 6.1% |
| 9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in the major interests of their friends who are parents, and are therefore left out of most social cirlcles. | 14.0% | 13.6% | 15.9% | 15.8% | 77.7% | 76.1% | 76.2% | 74.1% | 8.3% | 10.2% | 7.9% | 10.2% |
| 10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore parents should have children while they are still young. | 22.1% | 18.0% | 15.8% | 21.1% | 67.0% | 68.8% | 72.0% | 66.7% | 10.8% | 13.1% | 12.2% | 12.12% |

* In the table, the percentages strongly agreeing and agreeing were combined, and the percentages strongly disagreeing and disagreeing were combined.

TABLE 2. TOTAL AVERAGE PERCENT BY STATES AGREEING AND DISAGREEING* IN A FOUR-STATE SAMPLE

| | AGREE | DISAGREE | UNDECIDED |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage. | 10.3% | 82.1% | 7.7% |
| 2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage. | 79.1% | 11.3% | 9.7% |
| 3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of marriage. | 6.1% | 81.1% | 12.9% |
| 4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in their marriage. | 7.1% | 78.1% | 14.8% |
| 5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home. | 17.8% | 65.6% | 19.1% |
| 6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child. | 9.4% | 84.4% | 6.2% |
| 7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so. | 3.6% | 93.7% | 2.8% |
| 8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eagler to have a child as soon as possible. | 7.1% | 85.7% | 7.3% |
| 9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in the major interests of their friends who are parents and are therefore left out of most social circles. | 14.8% | 76.0% | 7.1% |
| 10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore, parents should have children while they are still young. | 19.3% | 68.6% | 12.1% |

*In the table, the percentages strongly agreeing and agreeing were combined, and the percentages strongly disagreeing and disagreeing were combined.

TABLE 3. MEAN SCORES FOR SCALE ITEMS IN A FOUR-STATE SAMPLE

| | California | Iowa | Nebraska | North Dakota | Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage. | 2.07 | 2.14 | 1.95 | 1.97 | 2.03 |
| 2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage. | 3.91 | 3.82 | 3.86 | 4.00 | 3.90 |
| 3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of marriage. | 1.92 | 2.06 | 2.03 | 1.96 | 1.99 |
| 4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in their marriage. | 2.07 | 2.07 | 2.15 | 2.06 | 2.09 |
| 5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home. | 2.21 | 2.16 | 2.80 | 2.28 | 2.36 |
| 6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child. | 1.99 | 1.78 | 1.99 | 1.90 | 1.91 |
| 7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so. | 1.64 | 1.63 | 1.65 | 1.64 | 1.64 |
| 8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eager to have a child as soon as possible. | 1.90 | 1.87 | 1.94 | 1.86 | 1.89 |
| 9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in major interests of their friends who are parents, and are therefore left out of most social circles. | 2.07 | 2.16 | 2.24 | 2.24 | 2.18 |
| 10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore, parents should have children while they are still young. | 2.31 | 2.27 | 2.26 | 2.39 | 2.31 |
| Item Sum | 22.09 | 21.96 | 22.87 | 22.30 | 22.31 |

*Significant at .05 level

TABLE 4. MEAN SCORES FOR SCALE ITEMS
FOR FEMALES WHO DESIRE SMALL FAMILIES
VS
FEMALES WHO DESIRE LARGE FAMILIES

| | SMALL FAMILIES (N=742) | LARGE FAMILIES (N=239) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. The best time to begin having children is usually within the first two years of marriage. | 1.9 | 2.4* |
| 2. It is important for a young couple to enjoy their social life first and to have children later in the marriage. | 4.0* | 3.7 |
| 3. A marriage relationship is strengthened if children are born in the early years of marriage. | 1.9 | 2.2* |
| 4. Women are generally happier if they have children early in their marriage. | 2.0 | 2.3* |
| 5. Men are generally tied closer to the marriage when there are children in the home. | 2.3 | 2.5* |
| 6. Most young married women lack self-fulfillment until they have a child. | 1.8 | 2.2* |
| 7. Young couples who do not have children are usually unable to do so. | 1.6 | 1.8* |
| 8. Married couples who have mature love for each other will be eager to have a child as soon as possible. | 1.8 | 2.1* |
| 9. Couples who do not have children cannot share in major interests of their friends who are parents, and are therefore left out of most social circles. | 2.2 | 2.2 |
| 10. Children enjoy their parents more when the parents are nearer their own age; therefore, parents should have children while they are still young. | 2.3 | 2.4 |

*Significant at .05 level

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